

# What's for Dinner? (A Smallmouth Bass Diet)

By Brian Shumaker

A smallmouth angler needs to understand to some extent what these fish eat, in the waters they are fishing. Smallmouth bass are top carnivores and predators. They eat just about anything that moves and that is one of the reasons that they are a sought-after game fish.

Smallmouth bass feed mostly during the daytime hours, with the highest activity at dawn and dusk. They will feed at night during the summer months.

What smallmouth bass eat depends on many factors, which include:

Availability of food:

Air temperature:

Water temperature: Age or size of the bass: Season:

Size of available food:

By understanding the natural foods which they feed on day in and day out, and imitating them successfully, will greatly increase your chances of catching smallmouth. Smallmouth bass are opportunistic feeders, feeding on large insects both aquatic and terrestrial. But feeding on insects usually occurs when the bugs are abundant, for example when you have a hatch coming off the water.

What makes up the majority of the smallmouth bass diet are small fish. Because most smallmouth waters have an array of minnows, darters, and sculpins, baitfish become the most important food. By the time a smallmouth bass reaches 3 inches they will feed on fish smaller than themselves and will supplement their diet with crayfish and insects. Baitfish have a wide range of size, shape, colors and live in different parts of the stream or river. Sculpins and darters swim tight to the bottom and minnows will swim throughout the water column. Also, different species of batfish have seasonal importance to the smallmouth



bass. The trick is to observe the water and try and figure out what to bass are feeding on and match the behavior of both bait and bass. No two sections of a river are the same. For example, on a smallmouth river that I fish regularly, one section has a very good population of gizzard shad,

you can go a few miles upriver and the baitfish will be river shiners. Knowing how smallmouth feed on baitfish is important as it will help in your presentation of the fly. Smallmouths approach their prey from behind and quickly move to the side and inhale the baitfish head on. Depending on the availability of baitfish and the time of year, smallmouth either roams a stream chasing bait or will lie in ambush near structure. Fishing a baitfish imitation is similar to matching the hatch on a trout stream, and can be just as exciting. Fishing a fly that closely match the characteristics, size, shape, color and actions of the prevalent baitfish will greatly increase your success rate.

#### Shinner Minnows:

The shinner minnow is a schooling minnow that lives over the shallow gravel bars in water six inches to two feet deep. When the grass beds form in the summer you will find

many shiners thought. Common shiners are the silver shiner, golden shiner, and the emerald shinner common in the Great Lakes and there tributaries.

#### Chub Minnows:

Chub minnows are probably the most distributed minnows in many smallmouth waters, they are not schooling minnows.

Chub minnows are robust silver minnows, that resemble a tiny tarpon averaging around four inches. You will find them below riffles, in heavy runs, and cuts between ledges. They are unique in they build their spawning nests from gravel and small pebbles in the water by picking up

the gravel with their mouths and placing them in piles. The nest varies in size with some being very large.

#### Sculpins:

Sculpins are small bottom-dwellers that prefer a clean stony bottom. They reach four to five inches in length.

Sculpins do not have swim bladders and swim tight to the bottom with short erratic darts. Preferring faster-moving waters such as the heads of pools, they will spawn in the riffles in the spring.

#### Crayfish:

Crayfish are crustaceans that live in rivers and streams that have semisoft bottoms, with rock, rip-rap, grass and other types of structure. In the spring when water temps get above 46 degrees, crayfish start becoming active. As the water temperatures continue to warm

up in late spring the crayfish prepare to spawn. Crayfish are most available to smallmouth bass from late spring to early fall. Juvenile crayfish hatch during early summer, and once they reach a size of 1/2 inch to 3/4 inch is when they become a primary food source for the bass. These young crayfish represent a major increase in forage that is available in the river, sort of a hatch occurring during early to mid-summer. Adult crayfish tend to be nocturnal; these young-of-the-year crayfish remain active throughout the day. As crayfish grow they shed their shells, and since the smaller crayfish have the highest rate of growth they molt most frequently. Immediately after they molt, crayfish are at their most vulnerable stage. Crayfish colors will vary throughout the season as well as the type of habitat that they are living in. I have seen them from light olive to brown, orange, and even purple.

#### Hellgrammite:

This is the larva of the Dobson fly. Female Dobson flies lay their eggs on a dry surface near water, usually on exposed rock, or overhanging vegetation. The white circular egg masses consist of eggs that can take from a few days to a few weeks to hatch. When they hatch the larvae drops into the water, spending up to three years till they mature.

Hellgrammites prefer well aerated riffles made up of small to medium

size rocks, they usually are most active from late May until mid-July.

After maturing the hellgrammite crawl onto land near the water burrowing into wet soil or beneath logs, where they pupate for about two weeks. They emerge as adult Dobson flies, living only about two weeks before they mate, lay eggs and die.



Hellgrammites are an important year-round food source for the bass, especially in the spring and early summer.

Aquatic Insects:

Larger smallmouth bass prefer a meal of baitfish or crayfish, but a part of their diet is made up of insects. Most insects are classified into groups such as Stoneflies, Caddisflies, and Mayflies. They are all important for the survival and growth of smallmouth bass from the young-of-the-year to adult bass as well. Hatches that occur during May and June provide plenty of food for the young-of-the-year smallmouth. On the majority of Smallmouth Rivers, hatches occur during the months from June to October, and most hatches occur around dusk or early evening. The largest and most anticipated hatch for the smallmouth fly angler is the whitefly. When the whitefly is coming off the river it is like some turned the light switch on and every fish in the river joins in on the action. Smallmouth bass are generally less demanding about matching the hatch than trout, you usually don't need an exact imitation or size. Fly fisherman can take advantage of these hatches, by knowing when and where they occur, and can add enjoyment to your river smallmouth adventure.

Most waters across the country have populations of damselflies, dragonflies, mayflies, and stoneflies.

White fly:

Also called the white miller, hatches on many eastern rivers from July

through August. The hatch starts in the lower stretches of a river or stream and moves upstream as the water temperatures increase. This mayfly has a life span of about five minutes, in that short span it emerges, mates and dies. Unlike other mayflies that go to trees, shoreline or rocks to transform from dun to spinner, the whitefly completes its life cycle in the air within minutes of hatching.

There are other larger mayflies like brown, slate, green drakes and they can provide exciting surface dry-fly action. Hatching during late spring through summer on many smallmouth waters throughout the country.

Another important hatch that you might experience are the light or cream color mayflies in size 12 to 18. These are commonly called light cahills and sulphurs. You don't have to match the exact size or color, bass will sip these flies off the surface just like a trout. Dead drifting a small yellow popper will catch these sipping bass.

#### Damselflies:

Both the adult and the nymph of this fly attract smallmouth. The male damselfly is more brightly colored than the female which is colored plain. The male will be bright blue, and the female is more green or brown in color.

Damsels don't hatch on the surface film, they migrate toward anything that resembles dry land, which could be grass floating in the water, rock, reeds. They shed the nymphal skin to become airborne. Damsels hatch during the summer months July and August. Damsels will hover above the water's surface looking to feed on insects and mate. Bass feed on

damsels by jumping out of the water to try and capture them. This can lead to some exciting fishing.

#### Other food sources:

Smallmouth will take advantage of any opportunity for a meal. They eat frogs, cicadas, and just about anything else that falls into the water and makes a commotion. The thrashing of these food items creates sound and disturbances that attract predators like smallmouth bass.

By doing a little research about your favorite smallmouth bass river or stream, and learning about the types of food that are available will not

only increase your success but make you a better smallmouth bass fly angler.